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Abstract

This small dossier presents a joint ethnographic attempt to address indigenous relationships with external or foreign agents as they are embedded in the images of the devil of colonial Catholic missionaries in the Andes and Amazonia (Dimitri Karadimas) and the sarode of the Ayoreo in a context saturated by modern protestant proselytizers in the Chaco (María Cristina Dasso). These ethnographic approaches are concerned with describing what there is in those worlds, but also with illustrating different forms to approach it. They carry out their descriptions through two contrasted types of fieldwork data: Amerindian iconographic expressions and indigenous narrative forms. And also two contrasted approaches: a regional comparison of Andes and Amazonia, and a focus on the Ayoreo of the Chaco. The final picture of these current anthropological ethnographies depicts some of the contrasted contents and forms that are nowadays being highlighted by ontologically-inflected Amerindian studies.

Keywords: Andes; Amazon; Chaco; Ethnography; Amerindian

Resumen

Este breve conjunto de trabajos presenta un esfuerzo etnográfico conjunto de abordar algunas de las relaciones amerindias con agentes externos sea tal como aparecen encarnados en imágenes del demonio en los Andes y la Amazonía (Dimitri Karadimas), sea tal como se expresan en los sarode de los ayoreo en un contexto saturado por el proselitismo protestante contemporáneo (María Cristina Dasso). Ambas aproximaciones etnográficas ilustran, no sólo descripciones distintas de los componentes de estos mundos indígenas, sino también formas diversas de aproximarse a ellos. No solo utilizan, pues, tipos contrastados de datos etnograficos (expresiones iconográficas y narrativas), sino también de aproximaciones (la comparación regional entre áreas tan vastas como los Andes y la Amazonía) y el énfasis descriptivo de un pueblo localizado en una región concreta. Finalmente, sin necesidad de una adscripción explícita, la imagen final de estas etnografías antropológicas actuales bien podría mostrar algunas de las encrucijadas temáticas y metodológicas que son actualmente resaltadas por los estudios amerindios asociados al llamado "giro ontológico".

Palabras clave: Andes; Amazonia; Chaco; Etnografía; Amerindio

Introduction. Indigenous visual and oral registers of non-humans in South American contexts of transformations¹

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A methodological imperative for ethnography

In *Framing Cosmologies*, Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad propose a “cosmologically conscious anthropology” that takes into account the relevance of cosmological concerns to a deep understanding of the contemporary world. In order to do so, its editors rejected the “reductive impulse” that has made the notion of cosmology simply collapse. Abramson and Holbraad regretted that, along with the rise of cognitive anthropology, this “reductive impulse” had continuously made “indigenous cosmologies become contingent, neutered and ultimately epiphenomenal to something else”. As the exoticised effect of the hierarchy of “modern us” over “primitive them”, indigenous cosmology was functionally differentiated as that part of the whole culture whose role was to totalise it (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 2-9).

This aim to abandon the “ideas about wholes that are naturally pre-given” is in fact an expression of *Framing Cosmologies*’ determination to show “the varied imbrications of cosmological concerns with political and economic practices” (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 18-19) – or, in Sahlins’ terms, the recognition that “the practical is also the mythical” (2014: 159).

According to Michael W. Scott, the cultivation of the astonishment for what we observe during fieldwork “is not only the best disposition, it is itself a mode of being, *the* mode of being – being *as* wonder” (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 33). In order to preserve wonder, an anthropology interested in “multiplicity, flux, and generativity” (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 34) could resort to a particular methodology. This methodological practice consists of an abstention similar to that proposed by Holbraad and Viveiros de Castro (2014): the

¹ Some sections of this introduction are a further development of Rivera Andía (2019)

anthropologist needs to “adopt a position of *a*positionality, a motile analytical transit that [...] is simultaneously no theoretical position, nowhere and no-when” (Abramson and Holbraad 2014: 37).

In similar lines with Abramson’s and Holbraad’s “imbrications” and with Scott’s wonder, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro invites us to recalibrate what is “real” in terms of those components of possible worlds projected by indigenous concepts. And this recalibration requires ethnographers to refrain from imposing their own forms of conceptualization during fieldwork (Rivera Andía 2018). According to Viveiros de Castro, “to think other thought” requires “an actualization of [...] yet unsuspected virtualities of thinking” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 25). This analytical consequence is explicitly stated: “My objective is less the indigenous manner of thinking than its objects, the possible world that its concepts project [...] [since in fact] no world that is ready to be viewed exists” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 17). Therefore, his methodological imperative implies not to explain the indigenous cosmology, but “to *explicate* it: to explore its consequences and follow its implications” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 219).

In consequence, we need to rethink the main concept and object of Anthropology: “we need an anthropological theory of conceptual imagination: the faculty of creating those intellectual objects and relations which furnish the indefinitely many possible worlds of which humans are capable” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 53). Followed by other authors (such as Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen or Peter Skafish), this position – usually summarised under the label of “speculative ontography” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 75) – promotes a “radical reconceptualization of what ‘the social’ might be” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 16, 43).

The most interesting thing in, for instance, Perspectivism (according to Viveiros de Castro himself) is not that it illustrates an ethnographic phenomenon but that it exemplifies this methodological imperative for anthropology thinking: the need to be able to exert radical reconceptualizations that allow us to escape from a substantivist conceptualization of categories such as “social” (and as its mirror, “nature”), which are considered not “applicable” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 242) to those indigenous cosmologies explored by anthropologists.

Stressing the ontological turn’s “commitment to recalibrate the

level at which analysis takes place” (Course 2010: 248), Holbraad has characterised it as a radicalisation of three anthropological basic requirements: reflexivity, conceptualisation and (empirical, methodological and theoretical) experimentation (Alberti *et al.* 2011). He insists on the need of rejecting any previous compromise concerning what type of phenomena could constitute an ethnographic discipline and how the anthropological concepts should be transformed in order to observe them. His radicalisation of reflexivity indeed gives conceptualisation a central place in the ontological turn, which aims to transform critical reflexivity into conceptual creativity (Holbraad 2014: 128-137; Alberti *et al.* 2011: 907). Consequently, he describes his ontographic approach as a “break out of the circle of our conceptual repertoire” (Holbraad 2009: 433) using “the extraordinary data to reconceptualize ordinary assumptions in extraordinary ways” (Holbraad 2009: 435; see also Lebner 2017: 225; Wardle & Schaffner 2017: 11). According to him, a “copious effort” (Holbraad 2009: 434) or an “extra care” (436) is needed “to explore the enormous conceptual wealth of the Western intellectual tradition in order to find concepts that may [...] be appropriate to the analysis of animism” (436). What this dossier would like to contribute to is to show some of the consequences of this take of the so-called “ontological turn” as a strictly methodological proposal (Salmon and Charbonnier 2014: 567; Charbonnier *et al.* 2017: 7; Jensen 2017: 530-531; Pedersen 2017: 229-230).

Highland’s and Lowland’s incorporations of exogenous entities

In this context, these two ethnographies underline how ethnographic Amerindian studies can understand the multiplicity of conceptual and practical relationships that humans establish with the elements that compose their environment. They try to facilitate the use of anthropological imagination and the forging of new concepts and approaches that could help release Amerindian studies from the “centrality and paradigmatic clout” of certain “conventional tools” (Descola 2014: 278-279). Willing to acknowledge that much detailed research is necessary to understand the multiplicity of conceptual and practical relationships that humans establish with their environment, they want to

test the potency of detailed ethnographic field studies that are not beholden to the most recent theoretical developments.

As a whole, the works of María Cristina Dasso and Dimitri Karadimas compiled here² engage with those incessant transformations that emerge at the interface of indigenous understandings of historical dynamics, current intercultural relations and expectations (High 2015: 74). Stressing either national or international dimensions, or internal structures observed during fieldwork, the authors deal with one particularly recurrent figure in debates on “cultural changes” within indigenous peoples: the adoption and incorporation of foreign powers and wealth. The studies joined in this section all account for transformations by paying attention to inner dynamics, rather than by focusing (in terms of loss or infection) exclusively on exogenous (either regional or national) conditions (Bessire 2014; High 2015).

Beyond the thematic similarity of addressing alterity in Amerindian worlds, both Dasso’s and Karadimas’ ethnographies can be put in perspective highlighting their main features. Considering either indigenous visual representations (such as different images of the devil in the Andes and Amazonia) or a specific oral tradition (such as Ayoreo *sarode* songs in the Chaco), they also constitute good examples of radically different (but equally suggestive) ethnographic approaches: a broad regional comparison of images from Andean and Amazonian areas, and a focus on specific narrative forms of the Ayoreo people of the Chaco.

Dimitri Karadimas deals with Amerindian images of the “devil”, first in the Andean area. These images constitute for him a source of indigenous worldings both in past and contemporary Andean cultures. Among the many Andean rites that offer visual manifestations of the devil, Karadimas pays attention to one of its most well-known and multifaceted versions: the carnival of Oruro, in Bolivia. His article links it to the local narratives about its origins, in particular to the myth of a regretful legendary thief, which appears as an anthropomorphised version of a specific insect closely connected to the devil. This Andean

² Following his will and as a very modest tribute to his comparative interest on the Andes, I include here Dimitri Karadimas’ slight reformulation (in the original language in which it was written, French) of his article published in English (Karadimas 2015) in a dossier I coordinated a few years ago.

insect, in turn, recalls the identification between the devil and certain Amazonian wasp. At the end, this work of Karadimas shows how multiple association between the devil and other Amerindian non-human entities would indeed be a product of a trans-regional adaptive cultural response.

The study of María Cristina Dasso shows some of the effects of the establishment of a new type of universe by Christianity as the product of a particular “translation” made by missionaries who came to live among the Ayoreo. She explores these processes of translation from an Amerindian point of view showing the importance of embracing not only concepts but also things that are “brought” from one world to another. The emphasis of Dasso in the indigenous concern for the identification of specific ontological components of Ayoreo life could also foster a subsequent stress on the practical affairs linked to cosmological changes. Ayoreo have long been exposed to foreign ideologies and practices and their songs certainly acknowledge the marks they have exerted on their world.

Both Dasso’s and Karadimas’ ethnographies constitute ethnographic reflections not only of the transformations affecting these regions of South America (Chaco and Amazonia, respectively), but also of the aftermath of those transformation. They remind us of those anthropological projects – sometimes labeled as “ontography” – that aim to grasp South American worlds that are turbulent, subdued, ignored and “actively produced as non-existent” (Escobar 2016: 15; see also Schavelzon 2016; Todd 2016: 15). Both Dasso and Karadimas present ethnographic studies that aim to avoid prophetic futurisms and “idealized and nostalgic fantasies” (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2011) in order to pay attention to the “mixturas” (Ortiz Rescaniere and Yamamoto Suda 1999) that pervade indigenous peoples’ ontologies (Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014; Bessire 2014: 228; Povinelli 2001; Killick 2015; Lebner 2017: 225; Scott 2014; Carstensen 2014).

Either concerned with describing the content of particular indigenous worlds, or with the different possible forms to approach them, Dasso and Karadimas attempt to ethnographically address Amerindian collectives’ alterity and to produce a critique of indigenous relationships with externally driven agents and forces. They opt to overcome the hypnotic magic of “agribusiness writing” (Taussig 2015), carrying

out their descriptions both through abstract indigenous concepts and material things, and essaying (in different forms) an ethnography that could prevent them from operating a mere adaptation to current theoretical trends. references

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